Fourth Sunday of Advent

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

December 18, 2022

*“And He Named Him…”* Matthew 1:18-25

*Before I get into the sermon, I am going to warn you that there is going to be an interactive piece to it. Namely—that is a pun—we are going to think about, and share how we came to have our own name, or how we came to name something or someone in our lives.*

*I will start the exercise by telling you about my name, and about the way in which I named my dog. So, think about what you would like to share and be ready, because if no one volunteers, I will just have to pick out someone!*

Joseph, as we just heard, named Jesus. It was probably not the name he would have given his firstborn son. He might have wanted to call him something like Joseph Jr. However, Joseph had been given instructions on how and what to name Mary’s child and he obeyed. That is what our lesson this morning is all about. It is about how we name people and things in our lives, and how names have significance.

It is about how God chose to name Jesus, but it is also how *we* name him in our hearts, and how his name lives in our faith.

Just before the passage we heard, Matthew has taken great pains to present Jesus’ genealogy. He seems to do this in order to get to show that Jesus is the Messiah, but also to get us to this story about Joseph and his part in Jesus’ story.

Joseph is the Son of David—that is his family ancestry. So, it may be assumed that Jesus is also of that lineage—except, as one theologian has noted—when we get to Joseph and Jesus, Joseph—unlike the rest of his ancestors—is *not* explicitly named as Jesus’ father. Instead, in verse 16 (just before this morning’s lesson) Matthew records that *“Jacob* [was] *the father of Joseph* [who was] *the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.* [v.16]

You and I know that Joseph was Mary’s husband, and we are neither surprised nor bothered by this because we are used to this story of Jesus’ origin and birth. However, this would not have been so for the first believers, nor for many of the generations after.

So, without the verses we just heard, Jesus’ nativity, that is his origin, is a problem because, up until this passage, Joseph has not had an angel visit. He was not yet been included in the special knowledge of Jesus’ conception. All he knows is that Mary is pregnant and that the child she is carrying is not his.

Now, many of us in this room are aware of what a scandal this was—to be pregnant without marriage, to be an unwed mother. For most of the history of western civilization, most western cultures have regarded unwed mothers as a scandal. This was true in Joseph and Mary’s day, and in fact, Mary would have been in danger of very harsh judgement and treatment.

Joseph, however, is described as a righteous man—he knows this, and while he does not want to expose Mary to danger, neither is he prepared to complete the marriage arrangements and take her as his wife. Therefore, he decides to quietly divorce her.

As we heard in this morning’s lesson, as angel visitation prevents him from going through with it.

The angelic intervention begins with Joseph being addressed as, *“Joseph, son of David.”* This is important because it reminds us that Jesus can only be a son of David through *Joseph*. Joseph needs to be the child’s earthly father in order to fulfill the prophecy.

The angel not only puts to rest Joseph’s fears about Mary’s faithfulness, the angel also directs Joseph to be the one to name the child.

“You shall name him Jesus,” he is told. [v.21]

This is important information, because if Joseph consents, if he accepts the angel’s directions and takes it upon himself to name the child, Joseph is acknowledging Jesus as his son. In effect, by naming Jesus, Joseph adopts him and incorporates him legally into David’s genealogy.

Of course, this business of the importance of naming is nothing new. From the very first, even in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we are given some notion of the importance of naming when Adam is given the task of naming every creature God has made.

This was not only an honor, but it was also the beginning of a particular relationship we can have with the world around us, in the way we think of it and the way each piece of creation can occupy our lives and awareness.

When we look around the world, or even around our own lives, what we find is that naming things, pets, and people, can describe for us our hopes for them, or even their function. And so, once upon a time, it was customary to name children—especially girls—after some good and blessed character trait. Thus, we have many women who are named things like: faith, or hope, or mercy, or prudence. We may even name our daughters, Mary, in hopes that she will be as strong and faithful as the mother of Christ.

Male babies are also given such names but seem to be more conceptual than specific. So, we get names like Lance—which seems pretty straight-forward. A lance is a weapon, but it is also the description of an instrument that is strong, and which flies straight to the heart of things, so it could be a way of talking about being stalwart and true.

Another male name, which is prevalent in our church, is the name “Wayne.” According to a website of baby names, “Wayne means wagon builder or driver. Wayne is a boy’s name that has stood the test of time. More dominant in English-speaking countries, Wayne is seen as a man of the people. Common in British working-class households, this historic and honorable name rolls off the tongue and looks good to the eye.”

So, naming children is often an exercise in hopefulness for them, and for the community in which they will live and grow.

Let us pause here for a moment, and see if a couple of you will share how you came to have your name, or how you named something or someone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Joseph was visited by an angel who helped him understand the great thing God was doing in the world. Then he was given a task. He was to name Mary’s baby. He was to become his father on earth. Joseph was asked to be the sustainer and support of Jesus’ earthly needs—the one who would feed, shelter, and teach him.

By calling him Jesus, Joseph obeyed God and accepted Jesus. He welcomed him into this life, and into the life of the world. Joseph, Son of David, called him Jesus who is also called the Messiah.

This is how we know him now, and on this fourth Sunday of Advent. However, we are also to remember the many other names by which we may know him—today we are reminded that we can call him “love,” because he is the very embodiment of God’s love.

So, when we call him “love,” what we are saying is that God’s ways and God’s character are always oriented toward that which is loving and good. When we call on love, when we say that Jesus is God’s embodied love, we are declaring that there is a perfect love alive and at work in the world—a love that is all kindness, patience, and eternal. It is also a love that wants to live in our hearts and lives.

But what else can we call him?

Let us also call him Prince of Peace—so that his peace may live in our hearts and lives and cause us to work for peace—peace in within, but also peace through justice all around us.

Let us also call him Emmanuel—God with Us so that there is never a moment in our lives when we feel alone or lost. This is the God who will go with us even into the most frightening places of our lives—through sickness, through broken relationships, even into death and dying.

Let us also call him Bread of Life—so that we are assured that life with him is going to constantly nourish us and make us strong in heart and spirit. Nothing will move or defeat us if our spirits are fed by such goodness.

So, how will you call on Jesus? How will you name him in your life? Will you call him your Redeemer? You Sustainer? Your Savior?

Friends, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, let us rejoice and be glad because we may also call Jesus Love, because he is that. He is God’s love come down to us to live with us and care for us now and all the days of our lives. He is God’s love made real so that we will have courage and hope; so that we will continue to have faith and to care for each other in love’s name.

As we give thanks for God’s love, and the name Joseph gave Jesus, let us also reflect on how we may call to him in our lives. Let us, too, name him love. Amen.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

Jeannie Darlene Thompson

I was adopted out as an infant. However, I am told that I was named Jean—or some derivative of that name—by my birth mother (who seems to have liked it so much that she gave the same name to another of her daughters who came after me).

My adoptive mother rearranged some of the letters in order to name me Jeannie—after a friend of hers. She added in the middle name, Darlene, because she liked it.

However, our name was not Thompson, it was Talalotu—one of the names of my father’s family. So, for the first ten years of my life, my name was Jeannie Darlene Talalotu.

My family called me Darlene at home, and so for the first five years of my life, my name was Darlene.

However, when I started kindergarten, there was another little girl whose name was Darlene, and it was his first name. So, I began to be called by my first name, Jeannie.

Jeannie Darlene Talalotu.

However, when I was ten years old, my father, brother, and I officially became US citizens, and my father decided to take one of the more Anglo names in our family so that we would be “more American.” He changed our name to Thompson.

Hence, Jeannie Darlene Thompson.

There is, however, an appendix to this long story, and it is this:

When I was in seminary, my father and some cousins came to visit, and I finally thought to ask what our Samoan name, Talaloto, meant.

Apparently, it is a compound word. The first part is “tala” which means “story teller” or to “tell about.” The second part of the name is “lotu” which means church.